

## “A jest with a sad brow”: Shakespeare’s ambivalent insults

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**Abstract:** Shakespeare’s insults are ambivalent creatures that oscillate between humour and pathos. That is what this article aims to show. It focuses on the part insults play in the articulation of humour and pathos in Shakespeare’s plays, Falstaff and his reference to “a jest with a sad brow” appearing as a case in point. Through examples taken from *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, *King Henry IV*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the article explores how insults and moments of insult convey the complex and fragile balance between humour and pathos. It shows that Shakespeare’s theatre of insult is based on the tension between laughter and tears, between the ludic and the serious modes or humours of insult, at a time when the word ‘humour’ was mainly conceived in the plural and still referred to fluid(s) rather than wit. This article first analyses how Shakespeare’s plays reveal a breach between humour and pathos by dramatizing, on the one hand, what is called “skirmish[es] of wit” in *Much Ado About Nothing*, and, on the other hand, what is called “heart-struck injuries” in *King Lear*. After dissociating comic and tragic insults, the article then shows how Shakespeare cultivates moments of insult when the spectators do not know whether they should laugh or cry, moments when insults waver between humour and pathos, between mirth-making and grief-making, moments in which insults hurt even when they are supposed to be humorous. This ambivalence is related to the ambivalence that is at the heart of the way the tongue is represented in Shakespeare’s world which points to its essential volatility, unpredictability and instability.

**Keywords:** *humour; pathos; Shakespeare; jesting; insult; Falstaff; abuse.*



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“[A] jest with a sad brow”: I had never paid attention to this oxymoronic expression uttered by Falstaff in *King Henry IV Part 2* (5.1.81), Falstaff, a character who is central when it comes to speaking about what Louis Cazamian termed “Shakespeare’s humour” (*L’humour de Shakespeare* 110-2

9). I had never noticed the expression before reading a short book on humour, just entitled *L’humour*, written by a French critic, Robert Escarpit, in 1960. In this book, the author drew attention to the phrase (74-75) to illustrate what he called the “dialectics of humour” (*la dialectique de l’humour*), notably based, according to him, on the discrepancy between the content of a speech and the tone in which it is delivered (Escarpit, 73-92). A lot of theoreticians of humour have insisted on the part played by “incongruity” (Eagleton 67-93; Larkin-Galiñanes 12-15) in the mechanisms of humour. The discrepancy between the jest and the sad face has to do with this in-congruity. The editor of the Arden 3 edition of *King Henry IV Part 2* notes that “with a sad brow” means with a “straight face” (2*H4* 392), that is to say a face that shows no emotion, especially no amusement. Yet beyond what could be a potential and inevitably partial characterization of humour, this phrase seems to epitomize the tension and the complex articulation between humour (jest)<sup>1</sup> and pathos (sad brow), a complex articulation that one finds, as we will show, not only in *King Henry IV* but also, more broadly, in Shakespeare’s plays.

The purpose of this study is to focus on the part insults play in this articulation of humour and pathos in Shakespeare’s corpus. I will strive, through a few examples, to show how insults and moments of insult convey the complex and fragile balance between humour and pathos. What I have called elsewhere “Shakespeare’s theatre of insult” (Vienne-Guerrin 241-248) is based on the tension between laughter and tears, between the ludic and the serious modes, moods or humours of insult, at a time when the word ‘humour’ was mainly conceived in the plural and still referred to fluid(s) rather than wit. Robert Escarpit notes that the first edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, published in 1771, displayed the difficulty in/impossibility of defining humour, a difficulty that Cazamian had identified in an article published in 1906 and entitled “Why humour cannot be defined” (“*Pourquoi nous ne pouvons définir l’humour*”). The *Encyclopedia Britannica* (801), Escarpit notes, offers two definitions or lacks of definition: “Humour, in a general sense denotes much the same with liquid or fluid. See Fluid” and “Humour: See Wit” (6). Fluid and wit: here are two keywords that characterize Falstaff who defines himself as being “out of all compass” in *King Henry IV Part 1* (3.3.20).

This study will first show how Shakespearean insults display a breach or gap between humour and pathos by dramatizing, on the one hand, what is called “skirmish[es] of wit” in *Much Ado About Nothing* (1.1.59), and, by showing, on

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<sup>1</sup> On jesting, see Holcomb.

the other hand, the emotional damage that can be caused by what is identified as “heart-struck injuries” in *King Lear* (3.1.17). After a brief exploration that will dissociate comic and tragic insults, I will analyse how Shakespeare also cultivates moments of insult when the spectators do not know whether they should laugh or cry, moments when insults waver between humour and pathos, between mirth-making and grief-making, moments in which insults hurt even when they are supposed to be humorous. We will relate this ambivalence to the ambivalence that is at the heart of the way the tongue is represented in Shakespeare’s world which points to its essential volatility, unpredictability and instability. Thus, we aim to show that Shakespeare’s insults are ambivalent creatures that oscillate between humour and pathos.

### “Skirmish[es] of wit” vs. “heart-struck injuries”: humour vs. pathos

Insults are often considered as entertaining and humoristic words that one can use out of context, mostly for fun. The many anthologies and goodies that use the cultural capital of Shakespearean insults (Vienne-Guerrin 241-2) are usually marketed under the category of ‘humour’ and they evidence the pleasure that Shakespearean insults can generate.

The title of one of the books of Shakespearean insults is emblematic of the link that is drawn between insults and wit: Wayne F. Hill and Cynthia J. Öttchen’s best-selling anthology is entitled *Shakespeare’s Insults, Educating Your Wit* [1991]. *The Little Book of Shakespeare’s Insults* is subtitled *The Bard’s Best Barbs*. It is advertised on Amazon in the category of “The Little Books of Humour & Gift, 4”. The description that one finds for this *Little Book of Shakespeare’s Insults* on Amazon.com starts with a quote from *King Henry IV Part 2*: “Away, you scullion, you rampallion, you fustilarian!” (2.1.58-59), which is used as a slogan or attractive subtitle. The presentation of the book goes on with the following teaser:

Along with penning some of the most sublime passages in all of English Literature, Shakespeare was a master when it came to casting a wicked comeback or hurling a barbed insult. Whether it’s Prospero calling Caliban a “freckled whelp, hag-born” in *The Tempest* or King Lear railing against his daughter Goneril with the damning words, “Thou art a boil, a plague sore, an embossed carbuncle in my corrupted blood”, Shakespeare didn’t hold back when it came to getting creative with his slights. Packed full of eloquent stings and poisonous putdowns, this is the perfect resource for anyone looking to scorn an enemy – without resorting to swearing! (Amazon.com website)

Taken out of their specific contexts these strings of abuse become emblematic of Shakespearean humour.

Shakespeare's insults are also present in the form of colouring books, such as *100 Shakespeare insulting phrases & Words*, advertised on the Amazon.com website as "a funny colouring book for teens and adults who love literature and have a wicked sense of humor." This follows on a previous colouring book entitled *Thou Lump of Foul Deformity! Shakespeare Insults Coloring Book For Adults* described as "A Shakespearean Swear Words Coloring Experience" (Amazon.com website). The book entitled *Shakespeare Insult Generator: Mix and Match More Than 150,000 Insults in the Bard's Own Words* is advertised, still on Amazon, as follows:

Put dullards and miscreants in their place with more than 150,000 handy mix-and-match insults in the bard's own words. This entertaining insult generator and flip book collects hundreds of words from Shakespeare's most pointed barbs and allows readers to combine them in creative and hilariously stinging ways. From "apish bald-pated abomination" to "cuckoldly dull-brained blockhead" to "obscene rump-fed hornbeast", each insult can be chosen at random or customized to fit any situation that calls for a literary smackdown. . . this delightful book will sharpen the tongue of Shakespeare fans and insult aficionados without much further ado. (Amazon.com website)

Thus, Shakespeare's insults are regularly used as a stock or mine of words in which one can tap to sharpen one's sense of humour and to avoid using an uninventive and repetitive offensive language.

One can feel this humorous, festive and ludic dimension in many plays and especially in the battles of wit that they dramatize. The expression "skirmish of wit" is used at the beginning of *Much Ado About Nothing* (1.1.59) to characterize the verbal exchanges between the two main protagonists, Beatrice and Benedick. Leonato gives the spectators on and off stage a reading grid to decipher the dialogues that we are going to attend between the two "wit-crackers" (5.4.99-100), Benedick and Beatrice:

LEONATO. You must not, sir, mistake my niece; there is a kind of merry war betwixt Signor Benedick and her. They never meet but there's a skirmish of wit between them. (1.1.57-60).

Leonato contextualizes the exchanges between Beatrice and Benedick to give the spectators the key to understand the *flyting*, that is to say the ritual exchange of abuse, that characterizes the duet. In *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*, C. L. Barber related these *flyting* matches to festive roots, mentioning the "abuse" as being part of "the customary license to flout and fleer at what on other days commanded respect." (6-7)

Insult is a source of mirth, merriment, entertainment and a sign of good humour; it constitutes the "holiday *humour*" of which Orlando speaks in *As You*

*Like It* (4.1.63). Most of the festive mood of *Much Ado About Nothing* resides in Beatrice’s wit or humour that is so “forcible” (5.2.53) that she “turns . . . everyone the wrong side out” (3.1.68) or “fright[s] the word out of his right sense” (5.2.52-3), even turning compliments into insults.

Thus, the expression “skirmish of wit” tells us that the insults that we hear are delivered *in jest*, that they convey a world of humour and should not be taken seriously. They do not hurt.

The exchanges between Hal and Falstaff in *King Henry IV Part 1* are emblematic of this festive *flyting* that is based on complicity rather than hostility. That is why in this play, probably more than in any other, the frontier disappears between abuse and praise. According to Bakhtin, in *Rabelais and His World*, this blurred tone of words is characteristic of the festive verbal world. *King Henry IV Part 1* is pregnant with what Bakhtin calls the ambivalent abuse or the combination or fusion of praise and abuse. For Bakhtin, the festive abuses characterize “carnival familiarity” and “while humiliating and mortifying, they are at the same time revived and renewed” (16). In *King Henry IV Part 1*, many humorous expressions, be they addressed to Falstaff, Hostess Quickly or Bardolph, waver between insults and endearments: “My old Lad of the castle” (1.2.40), “the latter spring” (1.2.150), “All-hallow’n summer” (1.2.150), “my sweet creature of bombast” (2.4.318), “good pint-pot”, “good tickle-brain” (2.4.387), “Thou art the Knight of the Burning Lamp” (3.3.26-7), “Dame Partlet the hen” (3.3.51), “my sweet beef” (3.3.176). These words both feed and reflect a whole community’s sense of humour. If insults and endearments overlap, it is because insult goes hand in hand with friendship in this play. If Hal and Falstaff hurl so many insults at each other, it is because they do not hurt. So, insults very often display and convey good humour.

Yet, on the other hand, Shakespeare’s plays constantly show that words can kill, and that, far from being benign humoristic traits, they can hurt and lead to suffering. The Shakespearean text, while dramatizing the vanity of the word, also suggests that words are weapons. This idea appears in Benedick’s tirade about Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*:

O, she misused me past the endurance of a block! An oak but with one green leaf on it would have answered her; my very visor began to assume life and scold with her. She told me, not thinking I had been myself, that I was the prince’s jester, that I was duller than a great thaw, huddling jest upon jest with such impossible conveyance upon me that I stood like a man at a mark, with a whole army shooting at me. She speaks poniards, and every word stabs: . . . (2.1.119-27)

Even if it is in a comic context, the speech conveys the damaging potential of humour. In *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, many metaphors describe tongues as sharp weapons, as razors (5.2.257) and instruments that wound, as when Berowne offers himself to Rosaline’s scorn:

Here stand I, lady; dart thy skill at me.  
 Bruise me with scorn, confound me with a flout;  
 Thrust thy sharp wit quite through my ignorance;  
 Cut me to pieces with thy keen conceit; . . . (5.2.396-9)

Insults may indeed be a source of pain, passion and pathos. Insults can hurt. In the comedies, the hurting word may remain a metaphor; in the tragedies, it becomes a reality.

That is the case, for example, in *King Lear*, where Cordelia's "Nothing" (1.1.87) will have resonances throughout the play, initiating all the tears later shed by Lear. The role of the Fool's humour is twofold when it comes to apprehending the pathetic outrages suffered by Lear: his humour both reveals and attenuates them. By teaching differences "between a bitter fool and a sweet one" (1.4.134-5), the Fool reminds Lear of his former splendour, thus emphasising his decline. But if he emphasizes insults through his comments, the Fool is also a soothing presence who welcomes Lear into his world of Fools. On the heath, only the Fool's humour remains to alleviate the King's suffering: "None but the fool, who labours to outjest / His heart-struck injuries" (3.1.16-17). Humour here appears as a counterpoint to pathos. So that when the "poor fool" disappears (5.3.304), all sources of consolation disappear with him. When humour is no longer here, pathos reigns supreme (Vienne-Guerrin 227-39).

In *Othello* the spectator attends the emotional shock that Desdemona suffers as a victim when Othello violently insults her. The shock is all the more striking, for the character and the audience, since the playwright presents Desdemona as "a child to chiding" (4.2.116). After publicly striking and insulting her in 4.1, Othello goes on abusing her in private, symbolically writing "whore" upon her (4.2.73), calling her "thou public commoner" (4.2.74), "Impudent strumpet" (4.2.82), before ironically questioning these labels: "Are not you a strumpet?" (4.2.83); "What, not a whore?" (4.2.88) and scathingly concluding:

I cry you mercy then,  
 I took you for that cunning whore of Venice  
 That married with Othello. (*Oth.* 4.2.93)

The insult is here all the sharper since it takes the form of an ironical, darkly humorous comment, which constitutes a verbal trap as the answer to it can only be wrong: Desdemona can neither confirm it nor deny it. She can neither answer "yes, I am", nor "no, I'm not" and so cannot but remain speechless. Expressed in this indirect manner, the accusation cuts both ways. Desdemona's state of shock strikingly appears when Emilia comes back on stage and asks her: "How do you, madam? How do you, my good lady?" and Desdemona answers: "Faith, half asleep" (4.2.98-9). She is in a hypnotic state that signals a traumatic effect, insults becoming a source of pathos in the play (Vienne-Guerrin 179-86).

If one can clearly identify and distinguish merry moments of humorous insult contrasting with cruel moments of verbal abuse, Shakespeare’s plays also often dramatize moments that oscillate between the two humours, between insult as a lively intellectual game and insult as source of pathos.

### **Wavering between humour and pathos**

Some episodes in Shakespeare’s plays interrogate the playful dimension of insults, the spectators on and off stage no longer knowing whether the words are delivered in jest or not.

*Much Ado About Nothing* offers a few of these ambivalent moments. In the scene of the aborted wedding, the playwright dramatizes the telescoping of the playful and serious modes:

FRIAR. You come hither, my lord, to marry this lady?  
CLAUDIO. No.  
LEONATO. To be married to her, Friar; you come to marry her. (4.1.4-7)

This church scene is based on a major insult when Claudio answers the Friar’s ritual question with a “No” that probably constitutes the most spectacular moment in the play. During this scene, the playwright represents the passage from the witty word to the word that kills, the switch from humour to pathos. The spectators on and off stage have become accustomed to the humorous, playful mode of the witty exchanges and to the amorous Agon between the protagonists. Leonato’s reaction shows that one needs time to adapt to the change of register. Leonato contradicts the Friar by re-dressing Claudio’s “No” into a witty answer. Humour through a play on words is here a shield against the violence of Claudio’s rejection of Hero. We witness the transition between two modes of insult. Leonato appears as an absorber of shock that hides the insult behind a play on words, offering a verbal shield (Allan and Burrige) provisionally euphemizing the violence of the “No”.

Benedick’s reaction signals the change of mood: “How now? Interjections? Why then, some be of laughing, as ah, ha, he” (4.1.19-20). Speaking of “interjections”, he reveals the shift from a spiritual to an emotional mode of insult, from humour to pathos. Yet the parodic reference to William Lyly’s *Short Introduction of Latin Grammar* (Civ<sup>v</sup>)<sup>2</sup> preserves the witty mode for a moment. Both Leonato and Benedick use verbal shields to maintain the ludic mode; but these shields will not last long and Claudio and Don Pedro’s insulting accusations will cause Hero’s swooning in the middle of the ceremony, hence her symbolic death.

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<sup>2</sup> See *Much Ado About Nothing*, ed. McEachern, 257.

The sequence in which Benedick challenges Claudio is also based on the overlapping of the two moods of insult. While Claudio and Don Pedro both playfully practise insult, Benedick uses it as a prelude to the act. When he “warns” Claudio that he is not joking (“You are a villain, I jest not”, 5.1.143), Benedick underlines and counters the possible gap between the emission and the reception of the insult. In a world where words seemed to be, like Beatrice, “all mirth and no matter” (2.1.304), the characters find it difficult to reinvest them with meaning. Insult is food for interpretation. From the outset Leonato presented it as such by saying to the messenger “You must not, sir, mistake my niece” (1.1.57).

Humour can be pathetically toxic. That is what appears in *Hamlet* when Ophelia says to Hamlet: “You are keen my lord, you are keen.” (3.2.241), which summarizes the destructive effect that Hamlet’s bawdy humour has on her. Hamlet’s toxic mockeries certainly do not “sleep” (4.2.21) in her ear even if they are full of innuendoes and indirections. Ophelia is one of the victims of the verbal “Mousetrap” Hamlet has prepared, in a context that Johannes Birringer has identified as the “trapicality” of *Hamlet*. Whatever she says, she is trapped and enmeshed in the web of Hamlet’s acerbic humour. The nunnery scene (esp. 3.1.119-26) has a highly insulting effect (Larguèche) on her. “Get thee to a nunnery”: when Hamlet utters this sentence, we witness an enterprise of destruction, a displacement of revenge on Ophelia who may later be seen as dying from the poisonous words Hamlet utters which, beyond the rejection they imply, also may mean “go to a brothel” through a pun on the word “nunnery”. The toxicity of the words will lead Ophelia to a place of mental perdition which will be haunted by obscene images. In Ophelia’s madness and death, one may find an illustration of the traumatic experience words may constitute (Vienne-Guerrin 173-205), which leads to pathos. Hamlet’s melancholy ‘humour’ proves cruel and destructive.

In a *Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, the words delivered by mockers are also pregnant with a pathetic potential. In both plays the mockers target the amateur actors for their poor performances of Pyramus and Thisbe, on the one hand, and of the Pageant of the Nine Worthies on the other hand.

In *Galateo*, a book on good manners, Giovanni Della Casa denounces the practice of what he called “scorne”:

Doe not allow, that a man should scorne or scoffe at any man, what so ever he be: no not his very enemy, what displeasure so ever he beare him: for, it is a greater sign of contempt and disdaine, to scorne a man, then to do him an open wrong. . . And the Nature and effect of a scorne, is properly to take a contentation and pleasure to do another man shame and villany: though it do our selves no good in the world. (62-3)

Then the text formulates a distinction between “a scorne” and “a mock”:



There is no difference between a scorne and a mocke: but the purpose alone and intent a man hath, in the meaning the one the other. For a man mockes and laughs otherwhile, in a sport and a pastime: but his scorn is ever in a rage and disdain. (64)

According to Della Casa, what differentiates mockery from scorn is the intention of the enunciator. While mockery can be pleasant and entertaining, scorn may cause harm. If mockery is essentially playful, scorn is serious. After drawing this distinction, Della Casa notes how difficult it is nevertheless to know the intention of the speaker:

It many times chanceth, in boording and jesting, one tackes in sporte, the other strykes againe in earnest: and thus from playing, they come to fraying. (65)

When it comes to mocking, therefore, one should be careful, because a joke can easily turn into an insult, and humour may tumble into pathos. The confusion of joking mockery and insult is at the centre of the play-within-the-play in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and explains the discomfort the embedded show, in 5.1, can cause in the spectator. The courtiers, by their mocking comments, produce a courtly noise that is as unpleasant as it is pleasant. The scene can be read as a moment of courteous insult. If, in the forest, the courtiers practised direct insult, at court the insult takes the form of mockery that is pregnant with irony.

It is the same at the end of *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, where the noble audience mocks the characters who impersonate the Nine Worthies, whose worth is systematically debunked by the audience. So much so that the end of the play may be full of pathos. Holofernes who plays the part of Judas has to endure the mockery of an audience that plays on the presence of the word “ass” in the name “Jud-as(s)” (5.2.620-2). The Pedant/Judas comments on the verbal abuse he suffers on stage by saying: “This is not generous, not gentle, not humble” (5.2.623). Even if, in the theatre, this scene with the Nine Worthies may be a great source of comedy, one cannot erase the unease produced by what can be understood as an episode of harassment, a verbal stoning: “how he has been baited”, concludes the Princess (5.2.625-6). Some productions throw into relief the pathos that can be found in this scene by suggesting that the actors are shattered by these biting words.

In *King Henry IV*, Parts 1 and 2, Shakespeare stages the shift from benign to lethal insults, from the ludic mode to the serious mode. One can measure this shift at the end of *King Henry IV Part 2*, when the new King scathingly tells Falstaff “I know thee not old man” (5.5.46), a rejection that has a mostly pathetic effect on stage as it contrasts with the past merry humour shared by the two characters. The pathetic anticlimactic effect is all the stronger since Falstaff, a few scenes before, had imagined how he would make Hal laugh at the expense of Master Shallow:

I will devise matter enough out of this Shallow to keep Prince Harry in continual laughter the wearing out of six fashions, which is four terms, or two actions, and 'a shall laugh without intervallums. O, it is much that a lie with a slight oath and a jest with a sad brow will do with a fellow that never had the ache in his shoulders! O, you shall see him laugh till his face be like a wet cloak ill laid up! (5.1.76-84)

Falstaff provides a recipe to trigger Hal's laughter. But in fact, Falstaff's tragic fate is that he will never make Hal laugh anymore. By becoming the King, Henry loses his sense of humour and turns into an agelast. This transformation, which is the source of pathos at the end of *King Henry IV Part 2*, was prepared by the "No abuse?" sequence a few scenes before (Vienne-Guerrin 1-4). Questioning the impact of words, the "No abuse?" question asked by Poins (2.4.321) reveals the unpredictability and variability of the effect words can have on an addressee. Both humour and pathos gain in being apprehended from a 'pragmatic' perspective, that is to say as effects emerging from or produced by the scripts of the plays and then made more or less palpable and more or less visible, more or less conspicuous from one performance to another. Like insults, what humour and pathos have in common is that they rest both not only on the emission of words but also on their reception. A word may be conceived or emitted as humorous, and be received otherwise, while the humour of a situation may arise beyond any intention to be humorous. In the same way, pathos may unexpectedly be felt, whether it was originally meant or not. The question of sensitivity is key to apprehend one or the other.

The question "No abuse?" suggests that the art of insult that characterizes the festive world of the first part of *Henry IV* is put into question in the second part but it also expresses the ambivalence of the tongue that delivers words whose effects can be unexpected. "Quò tendis?" (Paradin [1557] 109-10), "Whether goest thou?" (Paradin [1591] 137-8) 'No Heart can thinke, to what strange ends, / The Tongues unruly Motion tends" (Wither 1.42): the mottoes accompanying Claude Paradin's and George Wither's emblems of the tongue seem to find their reflection in Poins's comic incredulous interrogation: "No abuse?" could be subtitled "Humour? Pathos?" The question reveals that the same words of abuse can point in different directions and reach different aims. They can be ludic and serious, benevolent and malevolent, benign and lethal, and they can find their place in comic as well as tragic agendas and often both at the same time.

The pathetic shift at the end of *Henry IV Part 2* could already be felt in the *flyting* scenes in *King Henry IV Part 1*, and especially in the tavern scene in which Hal played the part of his father:

HAL. Why dost thou converse with that trunk of humours, that bolting-hutch of beastliness, that swollen parcel of dropsies, that huge bombard of sack, that stuffed cloak-bag of guts, that roasted Manningtree ox with the pudding in his belly, that

reverend Vice, that grey Iniquity, that father Ruffian, that Vanity in years?  
(2.4.436-42)

One can feel in the comic string of abuse the ominous presence of Falstaff’s repudiation and mortality: grey Iniquity, father Ruffian, Vanity in years. Falstaff’s death is not far, it is even inscribed in the fall one finds in his very name (fall-staff).

If humour is a weapon, it can also be a shield. Keith Allan and Kate Burridge’s *Euphemism and Dysphemism, Language used as Shield and Weapon* show that when language hurts too much, avoidance strategies are put in place. In the final scene of *King Henry IV Part 2*, Falstaff tries to use the playful shield against Henry’s destructive words, but the shield only protects him for a short time against the king’s insults and pathos prevails over humour. “This that *you* heard was but a colour” (5.5.84-5-): Falstaff, by an instinct of survival, plugs his ears, refuses to hear, euphemises the king’s murderous words and strives to stay in the game at the moment Henry officially leaves it. But the wound will come out again at the beginning of *Henry V*. All productions of *King Henry IV Part 2* show that Falstaff’s final jest, his shield against insult, is indeed delivered “with a sad brow”.

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